

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD HELD BY PAGANS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR
SOCIETAL MORALS, FINAL JUDGMENT, AND THE MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is primarily exegetical, evaluating the first two chapters of the Book of Romans, with the intent of exploring what the text says about the knowledge of God held by pagans. A pagan is defined as “a person who is not a Christian or Jew; a person who has no religion”¹ In the Book of Romans, a pagan is referred to as a Greek or Gentile, who were the non-Jews, without the written law as revealed by God.

The specific sections of Romans with which this paper intends to deal are found in Romans 1:18-32 and 2:14-15. It is these passages in particular which contain the most relevant text with regard to the knowledge of God held by pagans. First, a brief survey of the first two chapters of Romans will be provided, introducing the reader to the epistle and outlining the major sections of chapters one and two. Second, an overview of the knowledge of God held by pagans as revealed within these passages will be discussed. Third, based on this knowledge, the implications of these truths will be viewed from the perspectives of societal morals, final judgment, and the missionary enterprise.

¹ Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th Ed., s.v. “pagan”

Brief Survey of Romans 1 & 2

The Epistle to the Romans was written by the Apostle Paul circa A.D. 57. Paul was most likely writing to the church in Rome from the city of Corinth, which can be deduced from evaluating certain passages within the letter. In Romans 15:25-29 Paul states that he is going to Jerusalem with a contribution from Macedonia and Achaia. This suggests that his location was near to Macedonia and Achaia, as is the city of Corinth. Additionally, Paul mentions Phoebe in chapter 16 verse 1, commending her to them as a sister and servant in the church in Cenchrea, a port of Corinth. Finally, Paul sends greetings from Gaius, who was his host during this time (Rom. 16:23). In Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:14) he writes that Gaius was one of those whom he baptized while in Corinth. These facts, taken together, show that the city of Corinth is the most logical location from which this letter originated.

The destination of Paul's letter is the church in Rome. There is uncertainty as to how the church in Rome was founded, however what can be known is that it was not established by Paul, as he states that he had not yet traveled to Rome at the time of this writing (Rom. 1:10). The church in Rome was comprised of both Jew and Gentile believers. The exact ratio of Jew to Gentile believers within the church cannot be ascertained, however we read of Paul addressing both Gentiles: "But I speak to you who are Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13)² and Jews: "Indeed you are called a Jew" (Rom. 2:17) within this letter. Therefore we can be assured that this church was made up of a diverse group of believers, including both Jew and Gentile.

Verses 1:1 through 1:15 contain Paul's opening address in which he introduces himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, thanks God for the church in Rome, and shares his desire to

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references in this paper are to the New King James Version (NKJV) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

visit them and preach the gospel in Rome. Verses 1:16-17 provide the theme of this letter, summarized by the phrase “The just shall live by faith”. The remaining verses of chapter one (vv. 18-32) outline the general revelation possessed by the Gentiles and demonstrates that they cannot claim ignorance of God because God is manifest in them and in creation. Chapter two is addressed to the Jewish believers in Rome, in order to show them that there is “no partiality with God” (v. 11) and that although they have the law, they are law-breakers who will be judged by the law and found wanting.

Ultimately the first two chapters of Romans demonstrate that all mankind is condemned and under the wrath of God. The Gentiles perish without the law, the Jews are judged by the law. Therefore both Jew and Gentile are guilty before God. Paul brings this to a concise conclusion in the third chapter of Romans when he says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

General Knowledge of God Held By Pagans

As we look at verses 18-21, 28 and 32 of the first chapter in the book of Romans, we obtain the clearest picture of the knowledge held by all men as to the existence of God.

Romans 1:18

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

In this verse Paul is continuing on from verse 17, in which he states that the “righteousness of God is revealed”. Verse 18 begins with the word “For” which signifies that Paul is giving reason “for” what he has said previously. The righteousness of God is revealed, therefore the wrath of God is also revealed. The wrath of God in verse 18 is the antithesis of the

righteousness of God in verse 17. The righteousness of God and the wrath of God are two sides of the same coin. John Murray says that “Wrath is the holy revulsion of God’s being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness.”³ The wrath of God, which is the vengeance of God, is not anger or emotion, but holy and just punishment of sin.

This wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, that is to say that God’s wrath stands opposed to all wickedness of men. Some theologians differentiate between ungodliness and unrighteousness. John Murray, in his commentary on this verse, says “‘Ungodliness’ refers to perversity that is religious in character, ‘unrighteousness’ to what is moral; the former is illustrated by idolatry, the latter by immorality.”⁴ John Calvin, on the other hand, sees these terms as essentially synonymous, stating, “Some make a difference between impiety and unrighteousness, and think, that by the former word is meant the profanation of God’s worship, and by the latter, injustice toward men; but as the Apostle immediately refers this unrighteousness to the neglect of true religion, we shall explain both as referring to the same thing.”⁵ While all sin is ultimately against God, it would seem appropriate to differentiate between these two words in this instance, the one as sin toward God (ungodliness) and the other as sin toward ourselves and our fellow man (unrighteousness).

The verse goes on to point out that these same men upon whom God’s wrath is being revealed suppress or “hold down” the truth in unrighteousness. Because what is not possessed cannot be suppressed, men must therefore possess some knowledge which they can then obscure.

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 35.

⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans.*, Calvin’s Commentaries, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 19:68.

Romans 1:19

Because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them

The conjunctive word “because” with which this verse begins indicates that this verse is the cause of something prior. John Murray, in his commentary on this passage, says that “Verse 19 explains how it can be said that men hinder the truth in unrighteousness; they hinder the truth because there is a manifestation of truth to them”⁶. Therefore, the wrath of God is not revealed because men suppressed the knowledge of God available to them, rather the reason men are able to suppress this knowledge in unrighteousness is due to the fact that it is manifest in them. The wrath of God is revealed against all sin, of which the suppression of truth is only one part.

Romans 1:20

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse

This verse illustrates that God can be clearly seen by man through the external creation. Although God is a Spirit, and invisible to our eyes, nevertheless His handiwork in the creation of the world testifies to His existence (cf. Psalm 19:1). When a man is judged before God, he cannot claim ignorance, for God has made His existence sufficiently clear. This revelation however, is not sufficient to lead unto salvation, but only enough to leave man without excuse.

⁶ Murray, *Epistle To The Romans*, 37.

Romans 1:21

Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Paul now gives the reason that men are without excuse. That reason is that even though they do actually possess a knowledge of God, men have failed to live their lives to His glory and to give thanks to the one who gave them life and all good gifts. In exact opposition to this they “became futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Psalm 14:1 echoes this thought when it says “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

Romans 1:28

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;

We gain further insight into the knowledge held by all men in this passage. Paul here states that men “did not like to retain God in their knowledge”. This presupposes that they possessed a knowledge of God at one time. Rejecting the knowledge God had so graciously given to them of Himself, they were given over to a debased mind. Calvin, in commenting on this verse says, “As they chose not to continue in the knowledge of God, which alone guides our minds to true wisdom, the Lord gave them a perverted mind, which can choose nothing that is right”⁷

⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 19:79.

Romans 1:32

Who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

Paul, after illustrating in verses 29-31 the “things which are not fitting”, once again says that those who do these things possess a knowledge of God in that they know the righteous judgment of God. It is of no small matter that Paul, in verse 28 says that men “did not like to retain God in their knowledge” and then here in verse 32 states that they “know the righteous judgment of God”. It is as if Paul is saying that no matter what men would or would not like to retain in their knowledge, the knowledge of God will not and cannot ultimately be stamped out or completely removed.

Implications on Societal Morals

Romans 2:14-15

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts excusing or else accusing them

We see from these passages that the Gentiles, who did not have the written law possessed by the Jews, which was given to them by God on Mount Sinai, do in fact obey some parts of the law. Paul says that the law is “written in their hearts” and that their conscience bears witness. That this is true is exemplified in the history of all nations and tribes of the world. Each nation or tribe that has existed has possessed laws against certain acts which were seen as inherently wrong. Where do these laws come from? Here we have the answer, they come from

within man, from the fact that man is created in the image of God and thereby has a natural imprint of the knowledge of right and wrong.

That the conscience of man bears witness to this law is crucial to understanding the fact that the Gentiles, or pagans, are a law unto themselves. The sense of guilt and the freedom from guilt experienced by all humanity is illustrated by the fact that “their thoughts excusing or else accusing them”. Calvin calls this the “testimony of their own conscience, which is equal to a thousand witnesses.”⁸ However, the guidance man is given by his conscience must not be seen as an infallible guide to what is right or wrong. Scripture clearly shows that the conscience can be weak (1 Cor. 8:7), seared (1 Tim. 4:2), defiled (Titus 1:15), and evil (Heb. 10:22).

These truths, that the law is written in the hearts of men and that their conscience testifies to this fact, are the basis for societal rules and regulations. These rules and regulations are manifest in the laws written by the governing bodies presiding over each state. The command given in scripture to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18, cf. Matt. 22:39) is an instruction to us as to how we are to treat others. Often, in common parlance, this command is called the “Golden Rule” and reworded in the phrase “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This command would make no sense if we, as humans, did not possess a innate understanding of the basic difference between what is generally right or generally wrong. Therefore laws that are written, even by pagan nations, tend to be designed in order to safeguard the rights of ones neighbor. Every organized society has general laws against physical harm to others, respect for others property, and the general welfare of the society as a whole.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 19:98.

Implications for Final Judgment

In Romans 1:22-32 we are given a foretaste, an already/not yet of the final judgment. Just as the fruit of the Spirit is a first-fruits of our full sanctification and final glorification, so these temporal judgments are a first-fruits of the full retributive wrath of God to be revealed in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ.

This last section of chapter 1 is organized in an alternating pattern, presenting the rejection of the true knowledge and worship of God by men (vv. 22-23, 25, 28), interspersed with the judgment of God in response to that rejection (vv. 24, 26-27, 29-31), and culminating in the revelation of the final judgment of God, namely that “those who practice such things are deserving of death” (v. 32).

Romans 1:22-24

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves,

Men, having rejected the knowledge that they have of God, now foolishly turn to idols in an effort to express their inward desire to worship, a desire given by God as a gift to be used to His glory. The Greek word *allassō*⁹, which in the New King James Version is translated as “changed”, might be further expanded to mean “to exchange one thing for another”. Here men have exchanged the worship of the one true God for the worship of idols.

⁹ All Greek references are from *The Interlinear Bible Greek-English New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Henrickson, 1985).

In response to this we read that God “gave them up” to their wicked lusts. The Greek word which is translated “gave up” is *paradidōmi*, which is often used in the New Testament to express the act of delivering a person or object unto another for a specific purpose. The use of this verb signifies that this “giving up” is with purpose, or intent of action. Therefore this is not a mere passive act whereby God allows for these things to occur. On the contrary, this is the active judgment of God in response to those who have engaged in idolatry.

Romans 1:25-27

Who exchange the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever, Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

Verse 25 repeats what was said earlier in verse 23, however what is exchanged in this verse is the “truth of God for the lie”, whereas in verse 23 it was the glory of the incorruptible God being exchanged for the image of corruptible creation. God again responds in verses 26 and 27 with His righteous judgment against man. These two verses provide further details into what verse 24 earlier described as “uncleanness, in the lust of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves”.

Romans 1:28-31

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; Being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful;

Once again we have the pattern of indictment, “they did not like to retain God in their knowledge” and retribution, “God gave them over to a debased mind”. Although the verb *allassō*, to exchange, is not used here, we do see that an exchange was implicitly made. Due to the fact that men determined not to retain God in their knowledge, that knowledge was exchanged by God for a “perverted mind, one which can choose nothing that is right.”¹⁰ Paul then enumerates many of the vices which a perverted mind, unfettered by the mercy of God, desires and does indeed perform.

Romans 1:32

Who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

In concluding this section on the final judgment of God, we see from verse 32 that those who practice such things, i.e. the sins referenced in vv. 18-31, are deserving ultimately of death. The death alluded to in this verse is not restricted to temporal death, but indeed extends to eternal death as well. The proclamation of the judgment of God in this passage, when taken in conjunction with earlier verses in this chapter, demonstrates that pagans are in possession of what is “known of God” (v. 19), are “without excuse” (v. 20), fail to “glorify Him as God” (v. 21) and therefore are “deserving of death” (v. 32).

Implications for the Missionary Enterprise

What application does this knowledge of God held by pagans have toward Christian missions? The fact that all men have this knowledge should provide the missionary with comfort

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 19:79.

in knowing that there is no tribe or people group that does not possess a basic understanding that there is a God and that He has revealed Himself in His creation. What may be know of God is manifest in them (Rom. 1:19) and seen clearly in creation (Rom. 1:20). Therefore, when a missionary stands before men to proclaim the message of the gospel, there is no need to begin by explaining that God does indeed exist. Instead the presupposition must be that those to whom our address is directed already know that God does exist. Cornelius Van Til, in his *Defense of the Faith* states the matter clearly, saying:

There are no atheists, least of all in the hereafter. Metaphysically speaking then, both parties, believers and unbelievers, have all things in common; they have God in common, they have every fact in the universe in common. And they know they have them in common. All men know God, the true God, the only God. They have not merely a capacity for knowing him but actually do know him.¹¹

What they do need to be told, however, is that this God has appointed a time when He will “judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ” (Rom. 2:16) and that they are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). The gospel calls for a response from all men, wherever it is proclaimed. As Paul states in his speech at the Areopagus, “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.” (Acts 17:30ff).

Conclusion

The Book of Romans, chapters one and two, demonstrate that all men have a true knowledge of God. This knowledge is obtained from what is manifest in them and in creation. Men are created in the image of God and, although marred through the fall, that image still remains as a testimony to their Creator. Furthermore, the invisible attributes of God are clearly seen by all men in the works of creation. This knowledge leaves men without excuse, and guilty

¹¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Presbyterian And Reformed, 1955), 97

before God. There is no escape from the reality of this true knowledge of God, for God has so impressed it upon the hearts of men that it cannot be removed. However, men do suppress the truth in their unrighteousness. Therefore God brings judgment upon them, both temporal and eternal in nature.

While this knowledge is unable to lead to a saving faith, it is a guide to all humanity and human societies. The law is written in the hearts of men, causing them to seek the general good of themselves and their neighbor through the use of laws and regulations. Additionally, this knowledge serves as a “point of contact” with those who do not yet believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ, a platform from which the Christian missionary is able to expound upon the full revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, to the glory of God.

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